

11-1-1928

The Escape

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Owen. "The Escape." *The Palimpsest* 9 (1928), 405-426.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol9/iss11/4>

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The Escape

It was about eleven o'clock on the night of October 16, 1859, when father and his little company started from the Kennedy farm, five miles north of Harper's Ferry. He left Barclay Coppoc, Francis J. Merriam, and myself to guard the arms and ammunition stored on the premises.

Barclay Coppoc, the one who was with me through so much hardship, was a medium-sized young man, not over twenty-two or twenty-three years old. He did not look very healthy, but could stand a great deal, as you shall see. Still he was not so well educated or so energetic as his brother who was hanged. F. J. Merriam was of the wealthy Massachusetts Merriams. He was twenty-eight or thirty years old at the time, and not very robust. He had easy, unassuming manners. The only thing very positive about him was his hatred of slavery.

Toward six o'clock in the morning, we all heard firing in the direction of Harper's Ferry. The rain, which continued at intervals all that day and the next night, had already set in. Between two and three that afternoon, there was a great deal of firing in the direction of Harper's Ferry. Later in the

[This narrative of the wanderings of the survivors of John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from an interview with Owen Brown as reported by Ralph Keeler in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 33, pp. 342-365, March, 1874.—THE EDITOR]

afternoon, arming ourselves well with rifles and revolvers, we started toward the Ferry through the rain — Coppoc, Merriam, and myself. We had not gone far when we met one of my father's men, Charles Plummer Tidd, a large, strong, determined fellow, in the prime of life. A few minutes later John E. Cook approached out of the darkness. He had witnessed the fight at the Ferry and reported that the gallant little band was completely surrounded — the cause was lost and the only thing to do was to make good our escape. I hated to give up the idea of helping our friends, but I had to. To have lingered in that neighborhood would have surely cost our lives.

Returning to the boarding-house, we took a hasty supper and hurriedly seized some biscuits, arms, and ammunition. Up the base of the mountain about a mile from the boarding-house, we halted in the laurel. It was raining, and very cold. Here I told the boys my plan. We must follow the mountain ranges, making to the northwest when we could; travelling only at night upon the edges of the clearings; sleeping and hiding by day in the thickets on the uninhabited mountain-tops; shunning all travelled roads at all times, except as we were obliged to cross them in the night; building no fires; buying or stealing no provisions; in fact, not even speaking aloud. They agreed with me that we should make as much progress as possible that night. We each took two guns and one or two revolvers, besides a

full heavy cartridge-box apiece. More than this, I carried that night about fifty pounds of provisions. The others were opposed to taking so much to eat.

We started up the mountains diagonally. It was very hard work getting through the laurel and up the steep places with our loads. Well, we didn't reach the top of the mountain till after daylight. The rain had stopped, but it was foggy. At last we came to a road across the mountain. No one was in sight, so we ventured across. We were not quite concealed in the thicket on the northern side, when we heard the sound of horses' hoofs upon the wet ground, and lo! eight armed men rode briskly past over the mountain. We kept still till they had disappeared, and then we stole farther into the thicket, where we all five of us hid away in one bed for the rest of the day.

For all our narrow escape, I slept very soundly that day in the thicket. We awoke in the afternoon, ate some of our biscuits, and discussed our affairs in a whisper. Cook, in his fiery, quick-thinking way, was always proposing bold, hazardous measures. He to some extent carried Tidd and Coppoc with him; and so they were in favor of stealing horses, and riding right into death, which was lying in wait for us at every bridge and on every highway. Cook's wife was then in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; and he was bent on going there. So were Tidd and Coppoc. Merriam always abided by my decision. Now it was not in my original plan to go

to Chambersburg, but I had to consent to go that way.

I could not keep them from going down to the edge of the clearing before dark. It was cold, and they *would* be moving. Just as we were approaching the clearing where we could see Pleasant Valley extended before us, I beheld a man coming along the path through the woods. He was carrying on his shoulders what seemed to be a sack of flour. I made a signal, and we all dropped down, not far from the path. I think the man saw us, but he saw also that there were five of us, with two guns apiece, and with wonderful presence of mind he walked on without speaking or turning his head. That askant look of his, however, I have reason to believe, cost a sleepless night to the inhabitants of at least ten miles of territory. I had no difficulty now in prevailing upon the boys to wait till later in the night before attempting to cross the valley. Reaching the mountain on the east side of the valley, we pursued our journey along its side just above the clearings. Toward daylight, we went up to the top and concealed ourselves, eating our biscuits and sleeping.

This was our usual plan, and of course, we travelled very slowly. When we woke up in the afternoon, I had to argue myself hoarse, restraining the impetuosity of some of the others, especially Cook. He wanted to travel by the roads, and when the provisions began to get scarce, he insisted upon going to buy more. At last, to restrain him, I offered

and he took all my share of the biscuits; so that I commenced, a day or two before the other boys, to live upon the Indian corn which we found still standing in the fields. When the biscuits finally gave out, we were all reduced to the same diet of raw, hard corn.

Thus we had passed perhaps five or six days, going up the mountains to sleep and coming down to the edges of the woods to travel, when one night a cold rain set in. Toward morning it changed into snow; all day long the trees sagged with it, and our bed was covered with it—the one bed into which all five of us crawled to keep warm. We slept beautifully.

Starting on after dark one night, we came to where the mountain made an unexpected turn too much to the east, and we had to cross a valley to the next range. This entailed the half-wading, half-swimming of a bridgeless stream, and a journey of at least five miles through the snow and wet, before we reached the mountains again. A little way up on the border of the forest, we found some pitch-pine shavings and some wood, and here, in spite of all I could say, the boys made a fire. We were all wet and cold and exhausted by want of food, and I suppose the temptation was pretty strong. It was not yet daylight.

In the course of half an hour, while we were munching our corn, we heard what were unmistakably human voices, calling to one another, it

seemed, in the valley below. Soon after we heard the baying of hounds, evidently in pursuit of something. Now we had just crossed this valley, leaving our tracks, of course, in the snow, and the idea that we were followed immediately flashed upon us. We were not a minute in putting that fire out, scattering and covering every stick and ember in the snow and earth.

Then we hurried farther up the mountain into the thickets. We could hear all the time that the hounds were approaching us. On we pressed till after daylight. All of a sudden we came upon a clearing with a house in it, and along a road only a few rods away a man was driving a span of horses with a load of wood. Though the noise of the hounds was increasing and coming nearer and nearer, we had to wait till the man and team were out of sight. He fortunately did not see us. We travelled on perhaps a mile farther through the woods and laurel, until the day was so light and the hounds so near that we made up our minds it was time either to camp or fight. So we stopped and waited for the dogs. In a little while there was a light crackling of the brush, and a red fox with his tongue out broke past us down toward the valley. Soon after came the hounds. They stopped and stared at us for a moment, then went on after the game. It was many days and nights, cold and wet ones too, before we built another fire.

There is a gap in the mountains on the pike below

Boonsborough, leading from Hagerstown to Baltimore. That I knew would be a place of great danger: there was nothing like safety for us till we should get across that pike, but there was no other practicable way of getting out of Maryland. Finally, one night, at a sudden turn in the mountain, the gap opened before us; and what a sight it was! There must have been a hundred fires in view, flaring out of the darkness — alarm fires, we took them to be, of those who were watching for us.

I told the boys very promptly that was no place for us. They were quite ready to follow me. We retraced our steps half a mile or more, came upon a road, and followed it, right past a tall log house. Though a dog rushed out and barked at us, we thought best to keep straight on. We followed the road down the mountain till we came to a spring where, having hastily drunk and washed our faces, we turned off down to what we supposed was Cumberland Valley. Our object was to get across that Baltimore pike at some place out in the open valley, away from the gap and the people watching for us there. It was already as late as midnight, and our safety depended upon our getting across the pike and valley to the mountains beyond, before daylight.

Imagine our disappointment when, clambering down the rough mountain-side, we found that we had reached, not Cumberland Valley, but a ravine, with a steep mountain road towering right in our way on the other side. It was nearly morning when we

finally got down into Cumberland Valley, but we hurried on, and just as the first light of morning appeared, we crossed the terrible pike. Having waded a creek, we were hurrying across a plowed field, when clatter, clatter along the pike came forty or fifty armed horsemen, galloping by in plain view down toward the gorge in the mountains. We dropped and watched them out of sight. When at last we reached the woods, so weary we could scarcely put one foot ahead of the other, we found the timber too sparse for our purpose, and went on and up the mountain, still finding no safe camping-ground. On the summit we came upon a sort of observatory, which afforded a fine view of the valley we had crossed. Horsemen were scampering hither and thither on the highways, and the whole country, it seemed, was under arms. I had little difficulty in impressing upon the boys how necessary it was that we should be in concealment. And so, exhausted as we were, we followed along the ridge of that mountain-top for as much as three miles in broad daylight before finding a safe place.

For two or three nights we trudged through the dense woods. But after a while the mountain range swerved out of our direction and it became necessary to cross another valley. While reconnoitering we came upon a farm house and the smell of cooking food was wafted to us. Never before or since has anything so boundlessly delightful fallen upon my senses. It was more than the others could endure.

In spite of all my protests they decided that one of us should go to the house to buy food. Since Cook could wield the glibbest tongue and tell the best story, I decided he should go.

Cook was gone two or three hours, perhaps. He came back with a couple loaves of bread, some salt, some good boiled beef, and a pie. He had stayed to dinner with the people of the farm-house and made himself very agreeable.

In the course of that night we crossed two valleys and a mountain and got into the woods of another mountain before day. I was especially anxious to get as far as possible from the place where Cook had bought provisions. The forest now seemed so extensive that, after resting a while, we thought it safe to go on by daylight; and we travelled on in what we considered the direction of Chambersburg till the middle of the afternoon, seeing no traces of inhabitants.

At last we stopped at a clear spring, and finished eating the provisions bought the day before. Then the boys said it would be a good time to get a new supply. More earnestly than ever I tried to dissuade them, but to no purpose. They outnumbered me. Coppoc wanted to go this time. I said, since they were determined that somebody must go, Cook was the man most fitted for the mission. He left everything but one revolver, and took his leave of us, as nearly as we could judge, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. Cook had not been gone

long when two ravens flew over our heads, croaking dismally. You may think it queer, but it struck every one of us as a bad omen. We waited till dusk, but Cook did not return; we waited till dark and starlight, still he did not come; we waited till nine o'clock, till midnight, and still he did not come. He might have got lost, we thought; and we lingered about, calling and watching for him till at least two o'clock in the morning. Cook never came.

Daring to wait no longer, we made a bold push for the road, to see if we might in some way find him. After quite a while we reached a village and walked straight through it, taking the middle of the street. Only a few lights were burning. A half mile or more beyond the village, we struck through a corn-field, helping ourselves to the dry, hard corn, to which we were again reduced. Just across the corn-field we came upon a wide public highway, evidently leading to Chambersburg. Here Coppoe and Tidd astonished Merriam and myself by announcing that they would have to leave us. They said Merriam, in his weak state, could not get into Chambersburg before daylight; it was at least fifteen miles away. They knew that I had pledged myself never to leave Merriam behind. And so, leaving a gun or two extra for us to carry, and promising to meet us the next night at one of the hiding-places beyond Chambersburg, they started off, on the public highway, as fast as they could walk.

It was a wild, desperate thing for them to do.

Weak and worn as Merriam was, he saw as well as I did that they were exposing us as much as they were exposing themselves. Two could make little resistance in case of attack; and, we argued, our safety depended upon keeping up with them, and preventing them, if possible, from running more foolish risks. So, picking up the guns they had left, we started after them, in the belief that it was a walk for life, and I have no doubt it was. On we went, unchallenged, through toll-gates and past farm-houses. For the whole fifteen miles, Tidd and Coppoc never got over six rods ahead of us. During the race, some time before daylight, Coppoc left his things with Tidd, walked up to a house, waked the inmates, and asked the way to Chambersburg! He felt pretty sure, he said afterwards, that this road led there, but he was not certain whether we were going toward or away from town. Just at the first streak of daylight we reached Chambersburg and went to the house of a widow where father had boarded. But the place was guarded. It was a miracle that we ever got away from that house.

Though utterly fatigued, we made our way to the railroad which we followed for some distance before we reached the thicket I intended to hide in. We would certainly have been caught, if it hadn't been for a cold mist that hung low upon the land after daylight. The falling of the leaves had made our hiding-place much more dangerous than I had expected to find it, but we finally found a patch of

briers in the middle of the field, and crawling into it, made our bed there.

A little before noon we heard martial music steadily approaching us — not at all a pleasant sound under the circumstances. Then after a while it stopped; and, in perhaps five or ten minutes more, a train went shooting by on the neighboring railroad. The martial music then started up again at what we supposed afterwards to be the railway station, and gradually marched out of hearing. It was, as I have since heard, the escort that took poor Cook from the jail to the depot: and the train we saw was the one that bore him away to Charlestown, and to death.

A cold rain, with snow and sleet, set in about noon. This was no doubt a greater protection to us than the briers — so near to a populous town as we were. There were three or four yoke of oxen running loose in the field. An ox came browsing near our thicket, and by his disturbed manner called the attention of the whole drove to us. They would stare at us, then start off and come back in a way that would give warning of something wrong to any one knowing oxen. At last, to our infinite relief, they seemed to have satisfied their curiosity, for they went away of their own accord.

While we were lying there we had determined that, in the exhausted condition of Merriam, it would be best to run the risk of sending him on by rail. I mended his overcoat and clipped off his beard as close as I could shingle it with a pair of scissors I

had. All day long, more or less, we discussed Merriam's leaving. Coppoc wanted to go with him. I whispered myself hoarse, trying to convince him that he ought not to go. I was glad when, in the afternoon, a high wind arose as an accompaniment to the storm, and we dared to speak aloud. We shivered with the rain and sleet as we argued. I told Coppoc he would excite suspicion if he went with Merriam.

"We need you with us," I said, "and you need yourself with us — for defense, and especially to keep warm nights. We have lost too many already; we shall freeze if we lose any more now. When it is safe, you shall be the next to go."

Merriam, poor fellow, was so weak and worn that there was not much warmth in him. He was no use in bed or out of it, and besides, he couldn't have walked any farther anyhow. The snow and sleet stopped for a while as we were still arguing, and as I turned over on my elbow and looked at Coppoc, I could see that great tears had fallen and hung quivering on his waistcoat. He was thinking, perhaps, of his Quaker home in Iowa, and of his widowed mother there; perhaps of his brother whom he supposed killed; or maybe, he was in utter despair. I never knew; I never asked him. None of us spoke for a long time. The wind blew more violently than ever, and the rain and sleet came down again, and washed away the traces of the man's weakness — if it was weakness.

A driving snow set in that night, and it was as dark as I ever saw it in my life. We started together for the road bordering the side of the field opposite the railway. In this road Tidd and Coppoc bade Merriam good-bye and God-speed. Leaving them in a fence-corner, I took Merriam by the hand — it was so dark and he was so feeble — and led him to the railroad. Then I walked a little way on the track with him, so that he would be sure to take the direction away from Chambersburg, and reach the first station outside of that town before taking a train. Our plan was that he should thereafter go north as directly as he could. In due time he reached friends in safety.

Tidd, Coppoc, and I, leaving the public road, started across country. It was my plan to keep on in a northwesterly direction toward Meadville and some old friends in Crawford County, Pennsylvania. After a while we came to a creek swollen by the recent rain till it was at least five rods across. There was nothing to do but wade it. The water was very swift. When I reached the other side, I could not feel my bare feet on the snow, they were so numb. Getting up the steep bank we were greeted by the boisterous barking of a dog. A road passed along this bank with a farm-house on one side of it and a barn on the other. Not being sure where the road led, we decided to seek shelter in the barn. I tried to catch some chickens in the barn, but it was so dark I could not get them. They sounded

as if they would taste good. Even hard corn had been scarce with us lately; and we should not have waited to cook the chickens. We slept two or three hours in the shed — slept beautifully — our blankets and ourselves steaming with the wet and warmth. Then it stopped snowing and the stars came out, and we resumed our way. Toward morning we crawled into a brier-patch up a gully, and went to sleep.

About noon that day the sun came out, melting the snow and waking us. After a while a boy came along, leading a dog. It was lucky for us that the boy *was* leading him, for the dog got scent of us, and tugged at his rope to get at us. Jerking him along, the boy cursed the animal for his stupidity in wanting to hang himself. He probably came much nearer hanging us, as we thought at the time. In the open country that way, with such enormous rewards upon our heads, our lives may be said to have hung on the dog's cord.

After dark we made for the mountains with all possible speed and directness. After a while we came to a barn where I caught an old hen and a rooster, and wrung their necks without allowing them to make any noise. Putting them into the provision bag, we hurried on.

At last we came upon a gorge on the mountain, where we built a fire and went to dressing our hen and rooster. As soon as Tidd had picked the leg of the hen, he cut it off and began roasting it. It was nowhere near done when he began upon it, crunch-

ing the bones, and swallowing everything. After we had had a taste, none of us could wait for the old hen to cook. We ate her almost raw. Tidd, burning the bones, ate them, too. Putting the dressed rooster into the bag and burning the feathers, we started farther up the mountain to a good hiding-place. The country was so thickly settled that we did not dare to build a fire to cook the rooster till the second or third night after eating the hen.

A night or so later, I had the luck to catch four or five chickens in a barn. These of course went better when we got a chance to cook them, which was not till we came to a little shanty in a wild place on the mountain-top just before daylight one rainy morning. It was a mere hut of logs, covered with bark, built by people who had been there to peel hemlock bark for tanning. Some stones were laid up in a corner for a fireplace. The bare earth was the floor. We knew that the bark-peelers work in the spring, and so we felt comparatively safe and happy — all but Tidd, who had been complaining ever since he ate so many hen and rooster bones. We built a comfortable fire in the hut, and cooked a couple of spring chickens. It was the first house we had been in for many a day or night.

Coppoc and I slept splendidly as the rain poured down on our bark roof. Waking up in the afternoon we found Tidd still complaining. After dark I left Coppoc to nurse him, and went down the mountain for more provisions. About three miles away, I dis-

covered an orchard and filled my bag with apples, climbed back again, and found Tidd pretty sick. We did not any of us sleep much that night, for watching and taking care of him. It was almost providential that we had a roof and a fire for the poor fellow, or he might never have recovered. It rained the next day, and we stayed at the hut with Tidd, who began to get better.

Late the next night he felt able to travel, and we started. Our course now took us from one range to another, instead of along the tops and sides of the mountains, making our work much slower and more tedious. Still, by way of compensation we helped ourselves pretty freely to the chickens and apples of the wealthy Pennsylvanians as we passed; occasionally milking their cows for them, too.

We did not know where we were, except that we were somewhere in the State of Pennsylvania, and we at last thought we would risk the roads by daylight. So one sunny morning, beside a clear spring, we made our toilets for that purpose, putting on clean shirts and mending our clothes. I cut both of the other boys' hair. We rolled our shoulder-straps and ammunition into our blankets, drew our woolen covers over our guns, and started. Our first encounter was with a man on horseback, riding the same way we were going. He looked suspiciously at us, we were so gaunt, besides carrying guns. We talked him out of his suspicion, however, and into so friendly a mood that Coppoc rode his horse as much

as a mile, while the stranger walked along with Tidd and me.

That night we crossed the Juniata River, rode for several miles on a canal boat, and then proceeded along the main road toward Bellefonte. It was morning before we camped near an old farmhouse, occupied only by a couple of horses. There we stayed till about dark the next night, before starting upon the public road again. We had gone hardly a mile when we saw a nice little farm-house on our left, a short distance from the road. The light of the blaze in the old-fashioned fireplace came out through the curtainless window with so cheery an invitation to us that we could not go by. We knocked at the door and obtained permission of the farmer to stay all night. It was not long till the fumes of frying flap-jacks filled the air. If the stout farmer's wife had not been so good-natured, her suspicions might have been aroused by the ravenous appetites with which we devoured what she put before us.

Toward the close of that meal, the farmer in a casual sort of way mentioned Harper's Ferry, and then we asked him for news. We had already in some indirect manner learned from our host that it was the fourth of November. Thus we had been about three weeks in our houseless wanderings, without positive knowledge of the fate of our comrades — it seemed at least six weeks. We told our host that we had heard something about the fight at



COURTESY OF THE DAVENPORT ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

BARCLAY COPPOC

Harper's Ferry, but not all the particulars. This surprised him greatly, for he said the country had not been so excited about anything in the last twenty years.

The weekly newspaper had just come that afternoon and Tidd began reading aloud as soon as we could decently rise from the table. The first thing that caught his eye was the account of Cook's capture. You can imagine how eagerly Coppoc and I listened to the first we had heard of Cook since he had left us in the mountains. Our host interrupted the reading to assure me that one son of old Brown of Kansas had escaped with Cook and others, and was supposed to be still at large somewhere. In the meantime, Tidd had gone on, silently devouring the paper. Coppoc sat gazing thoughtfully into the blaze of the great fireplace, and I happened to be looking at him when our host went on to say that the very latest news was that the man Coppoc had been tried, too, and found guilty. That was his brother Edwin, and the ruddy glare of the fire did not paint out the deathly white of our poor Coppoc's face. He did not speak, but a little while after, he stealthily brushed away a tear from one of his cheeks, and sighed in a half-choked way.

After a few moments, Tidd handed the newspaper to me. I began reading the account of the fight aloud for Coppoc's benefit — how the little band had taken the town and held it all day against the States of Virginia and Maryland. In the course of the de-

scription of my father's courageous conduct, my voice trembled too much and I passed the paper to Coppoc who continued to read aloud.

We sat by the fire and talked of the dead and wounded as long as we dared, and then went to bed. After breakfast the next morning, having paid our host, we asked him the direction to Bellefonte, and for Quaker families along the road. He told us of a Quaker by the name of Benjamin Wakefield, who lived some twenty miles in the direction of Crawford County, Pennsylvania. After walking all day, we arrived at the home of Mr. Wakefield about sundown. Tidd approached the benevolent-faced old gentleman and asked if we could put up with him for the night.

"Thee and thy friends may come", said the Quaker. But when we appeared with our guns, he held up his hands in awe, and told us we could not bring our guns into his house. It may have been contrary to his church rules; but we argued the case a while and then hit upon the lucky compromise that we should take the loads out of the guns.

We had hardly got inside the house, however, when he startled us by saying, in his calm way, that he knew who we were — we were from Harper's Ferry. We asked him how he knew that. He said we were so gaunt. He knew we were hunted like wild beasts, and that fact and our cause were a short cut to his heart. After supper we talked long about slavery and the struggles and losses of our family in Kansas. He made us stay over the next day with

him, but told us to keep ourselves out of sight. He said that we had better travel for a while again only by night, for he knew that we were hotly pursued. Having stocked us with provisions enough to last two or three days, he told us the way to the home of a cousin of his, about forty miles away.

We parted with our good host and travelled two or three nights slowly as usual and as far as possible from the highway. Having eaten all our provisions we took to apples and corn again. Finally, late one night we arrived at the farm-house of Mr. Wakefield's cousin and aroused him. We said that Mr. Wakefield had sent us, and the man seemed disposed to let us in; but at this stage of the interview a second-story window opened and three night-capped heads were thrust out.

"No, you can't come in, any such thing", they cried. "We know who you are. You are traitors."

We replied that we had merely risked our lives for the freedom of millions of helpless slaves. Neither were they in favor of slavery, they declared, but they were also not in favor of putting it down by force. And there we stood arguing with the night-caps. The man was on our side, but when he said anything in our favor it seemed to go worse with us than ever. Finally we offered to give up our guns. At this the voice of what I took to be the old lady said, "Oh!" and one night-cap disappeared.

"Well, father," said one of the others, "if you want to take in murderers, you may, but don't ask us

to wait on them!" And the two other night-caps disappeared. In a moment the door opened and the Quaker told us we might enter. He showed us promptly to beds.

At breakfast the next morning, the mother and her two daughters would not eat with us. The man would not take any money for his entertainment, so we all went out into his field with him and fell to husking corn. At dinner-time the women folks seemed to be somewhat mollified, and we prevailed upon them to take some curious silver coins we had. Tidd and Coppoc went back to work in the field in the afternoon, while I went into the village and made my preparations for getting rid of our guns, and of sending Coppoc home by stage and railroad.

The next morning Coppoc very joyfully took the stage to Ohio. From there he went to Niagara Falls and as far east as Rochester, thence to Buffalo, then to Cleveland, and finally, on December 17th, the day after his brother had yielded his life on a Virginia gallows, he arrived safely at Springdale, "worn almost to a skeleton by starvation and exposure." Tidd and I continued northward, passing through Brookville, Clarion, Shippensburg, Franklin, Randolph, and eventually arrived at Townville where we obtained work. But it was many months before either of us dared to stay in one place very long.

OWEN BROWN